

Arabick Roots. 'Arabick'? Ask the Royal Society. London Dispatch by Ray Moseley

Saturday, 18 June 2011



The exhibition is a relatively small collection of ancient books, letters, scientific instruments and artefacts that tell the story of exchanges occurring between England and the Middle East five centuries ago. (Photo courtesy of Britain's Royal Society)

By RAY MOSELEY
AL ARABIYA LONDON

In the 17th century, an intellectual ferment began sweeping through scientific circles in England that drew scholars to the treasures of knowledge accumulated in the Muslim world since the Middle Ages.

Spurred by the development of diplomatic and trade ties between England and the Ottoman Empire, scholars in London and other centers of learning in England began to explore these building blocks of knowledge in science, art, literature and other fields that had been created while Europe slept through the backwardness of the Middle Ages.

Tradesmen brought back scores of thousands of Arabic, Persian and Ottoman manuscripts, and English scholars fanned out across the Middle East to find other sources of knowledge and to immerse themselves in Oriental languages so they could read and translate the materials they acquired.

Long before that, the European Renaissance had drawn inspiration and impetus from Europe's discovery of the achievements of the Islamic world during the Middle Ages. That is well documented, of course, but the story of what began in England in the 17th and early 18th centuries has until now remained largely hidden.

Britain's Royal Society, whose founders played a leading role in these developments, has set out to rectify that oversight with an exhibition called Arabick Roots. Opened at its London headquarters in early June, it will run until November, then transfer to Doha. It may go on global tour after that.

The organizers chose the 17th century spelling Arabick because the term at that time was understood to embrace not only Arabic but other Oriental languages such as Persian, Syriac and Ottoman. And the exhibition includes documents in these and other languages.

It owes its existence primarily to research work of Dr. Rim Turkmani, a Syrian-born astrophysicist at Imperial College London. Four years ago, she attended a roundtable discussion at the Royal Society, the oldest academy of science in the world, at which there was mention of Arabic books in the archive of the Society.

"I was intrigued," she said. "What were those books doing here?"

The Royal Society, she found, had a collection of long-forgotten, uncatalogued books stored in an old cupboard in its archives. It turned out that some were in Arabic but others in Persian and Ottoman, even one in Chinese. They had remained locked in the cupboard and virtually forgotten for many years. The Society also had a large collection of books translated from Arabic into Latin. Among them are the Canon of Medicine by Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and Abu Abd Allah Muhammad al-Idrisi's Geography.

Two large collections that once belonged to the Royal Society are now at the British Library, including manuscripts on astronomy, mathematics, medicine, grammar, history and literature. And the Bodleian Library in Oxford has thousands of Oriental manuscripts, many of them acquired by William Laud, the 17th century archbishop of Canterbury.

All of this material posed a bigger challenge for Dr. Turkmani than she had anticipated.

"I began research in my spare time," she said. "The story was getting bigger and bigger. I didn't realize there would be so much work."

Eventually she proposed to organize an exhibition and the Royal Society agreed. She cut back her work at Imperial College London and began devoting about 40 per cent of her time to research for the exhibition, supported financially by the Foundation for Science, Technology and Civilization. Further financing came from the Qatar Foundation, and the exhibition was opened by Sheikha Moza bint Nasser Al Missned, wife of the Qatar ruler, Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani.

AL ARABIYA NEWS

The exhibition is a relatively small but highly illuminating collection of ancient books, letters, scientific instruments and artefacts that tell the story of exchanges occurring between England and the Middle East five centuries ago. There are also paintings depicting two of the first three Arab members of the Royal Society, both of them 17th century Moroccan ambassadors to England. The Society, founded in 1660, now has almost 1,400 members around the world.

The 17th century Polish astronomer Johannes Hevelius, the first foreign Fellow of the Royal Society, gave an early impetus to the interest in Muslim scholarship. He wrote to the Society asking them to find and translate the star catalogue of Ulugh Beg, a 15th century ruler, astronomer and mathematician who lived in Samarkand. Ulugh Beg's catalogue was built upon the 10th century star atlas of the Persian astronomer Abd al-Rhman al-Sufi. That atlas came into the possession of Narcissus Marsh, archbishop of Armagh in Northern Ireland, and is now in the Bodleian Library.

The Royal Society tracked down Ulugh Beg's star catalogue and appointed Thomas Hyde in 1665 to translate it. Hevelius then used it to remap the sky.

One of the Arabick Roots exhibits explains the Arabic origin of names given to some stars. For example, names of many stars in the Aquarius constellation begin with Sad, Arabic for Luck. Al-Sufi observed five stars in this constellation that had not previously been recorded. He was also the first person to observe the nebulous star now known as the Andromeda galaxy. His contributions to astronomy were honoured by the naming of the minor planet Alsufi and the lunar crater Azophi (the name by which he was known in the West).

The astronomy exhibits include the second of Isaac Newton's reflecting telescopes, built in 1671.

The famed English astronomer Edmond Halley, who gave his name to Halley's comet, used Arabic observations of the sky and learned Arabic at age 50 so he could translate two books from that language into Latin.

Other Royal Society scholars realized that Latin medieval translations of Arabic had corrupted much of the knowledge transferred from the Arab world during the Renaissance, so they also learned Arabic to produce more accurate translations.

Robert Boyle, one of England's most famous 17th century chemists, was first motivated to study Arabic and Syriac because of their biblical significance. Later he became more interested in the natural philosophy expounded in these languages.

One prize exhibit, lent by the Science Museum in London, is Edmund Castell's huge Latin dictionary of translations from Hebrew, Samaritan, Chaldee, Syriac, Arabic, Ethiopian and Persian. It took him 18 years to compile and was a commercial disaster.

Several letters sent by the Royal Society to English merchants in the Orient in the 17th century are on display. The questions the Society raised range from "the present studies of ye Persians" to "How they unhusk their rice?"

The exhibit includes a reproduction of a 1634 letter by King Charles I to the Levant Company, asking merchants to send home an Arabic manuscript on every ship returning from the Levant.

Alexander Russell and his brother Patrick were Scottish physicians who traveled to Aleppo in the 18th century, and Patrick wrote to his brother, describing Arabic inoculation of children against smallpox with a needle. This more or less coincided with a smallpox epidemic in London, where scientists knew little about the disease and were somewhat fearful of the immunization practice long common in the Muslim world, in which healthy people were given a mild dose of virus from an infected person.

The Royal Society turned to the writings of the Persian physician Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn Zakariya al-Razi to learn about the treatment of the disease. Cassem Algaiada Aga of Tripoli, Libya, one of the first three Arab Fellows of the Society, gave the Society an account of the inoculation procedure and its safety record in Tripoli, Tunis and Algiers, which he said was practiced by both townspeople and "wild Arabs," meaning nomadic tribesmen.

In 1796 Edward Jenner replaced smallpox virus with cowpox, achieving a vaccination method that led to the eradication of the disease.

In 1640, Royal Society member Edward Pococke brought three trees previously unknown in England from Syria and planted them around Oxford. Today they are England's oldest cedar, plane and fig trees. Contemporary growths of other trees, plants and flowers brought back at that time now grace many an English garden.

Also on display is a 1678 tract by John Greaves, describing the use of large ovens in Egypt to hatch several thousand eggs.

The Arabick Roots exhibit is free and open to the public from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Mondays through Fridays. Visits are restricted to guided tours and must be booked by telephone (44207-4512597) or on the Royal Society website (royalsociety.org). But during the Society's Summer Science Exhibition, July 5 through 10, anyone may visit without prebooking.

(Ray Moseley is a London-based former chief European correspondent of the Chicago Tribune and has worked extensively in the Middle East. He can be reached at: rnmoseley@aol.com)